

My View: U.S. Must Commit to Helping Israelis and Syrians

U.S. Rep. Maurice D. Hinchey
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As Israeli and Syrian leaders continue to work toward the resumption of peace talks, they need to know that proactive American diplomacy and assistance will be available in the weeks and months ahead. The United States must be ready to do more than just stand by, poised to break diplomatic logjams. The Clinton Administration, with congressional backing, must give Israel concrete assurances about America's commitment to assisting with the necessary security arrangements. But the U.S. should also offer Syrian President Hafez al-Assad concrete incentives to stay at the negotiating table until a deal is reached.

If Israel chooses to withdraw from part of the Golan Heights, it will need to know that the U.S. will help provide the security and intelligence resources it needs to compensate for its departure from the high ground overlooking northern Israel. Israel must also be assured that the U.S. will assist its troop redeployment if necessary.

The Syrian side of the equation is less familiar and less obvious. It is clear that improving relations with the world's only superpower and raising living standards in Syria are important motivations for President Assad.

America's motivation to help should stem not only from our commitment to our ally Israel's security, but also from our own security interests. The same logic prompting Prime Minister Barak to pursue peace with Syria also makes sense for America. By completing the circle of peace around Israel, a workable Israeli-Syrian deal would help protect both the U.S. and Israel from weapons of mass destruction – weapons that might someday menace New York as well as Jerusalem. Alliances between Israel and its immediate neighbors would help move us closer to better, more sensible relations with other Middle Eastern states.

That is why Democrats and Republicans in Congress should rally behind the Clinton Administration's efforts to forge a compromise that protects the security of both Israel and Syria. Prime Minister Barak already knows that Congress would never sanction a deal that threatens Israel's security; it's time that President Assad receives the same assurances for his nation.

It is clear that active U.S. assistance will be required to ensure that adequate security arrangements are in place for each. Diplomatic and economic carrots may also be necessary, and we should be prepared to deliver on them. Now is the time for Congress to show the peoples of the Middle East that the U.S. is united behind the principle of negotiating a deal that is fair to both sides.

Unified American political support cannot be taken for granted. During negotiations on the Syrian track from 1993 to 1996, opponents of the peace process in Congress did their best to hamper American diplomacy. There is evidence that their activities convinced President Assad that he couldn't count on U.S. assistance in protecting Syria's interests.

Congress must not let that happen this time. The isolationists among us must come to understand that the Middle East is one part of the world where stability and peace are clearly needed to protect American interests and American lives.

Unfortunately, an activist foreign policy is not an easy sell everywhere in the United States, but it is imperative that we make the effort. Giving both Syria and Israel tangible incentives for peace will help deprive others of menacing weaponry and will reduce terrorism around the world – goals that the U.S. must support.

We already know that most American Jews want the United States to help make a deal happen. According to a poll by the Israel Policy Forum, 60 percent of American Jews say the U.S. should upgrade diplomatic relations and offer assistance to Syria if it “makes real peace with Israel.”

I think most Americans would agree with that sentiment if we presented a coherent argument on the benefits that an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement would reap for our own national security. Both the Administration and Congress should take this issue out of the realm of domestic politics and work jointly to facilitate an agreement that is acceptable to the peoples of both Syria and Israel.